

Message #18

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Life of David

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DAVID AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF
ESTABLISHING GOD'S KINGDOM
2 SAMUEL 2

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Perhaps some of you saw the update on the business news front this week. We have a new richest man in the world. It was recently discovered that Jeff Bezos, with personal financial assets of \$143.1 billion, has passed Bill Gates. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, has an 11% stake in the company. Amazon has been a rare winner in this coronavirus environment. The company's stock is up 40% since the middle of March.

Amazon now has 750,000 employees and 156 million Prime customers, who can choose from 12 million different products. It is quite a business. It is truly an American success story.

Amazon had small beginnings. It started in Jeff Bezos' garage in 1995 with an initial investment of \$100,000 from himself and a few family members. In the early stages every sale would be greeted with the ring of a bell, and employees would gather around to see if any of them knew the customer. Originally Amazon was a book company, and suppliers required that Amazon order at least ten books at a time. Amazon discovered a loophole and would order the one copy that its customer wanted and nine more copies of a book on lichens that was never in print and would not have to be paid for by Amazon.

Along the way Amazon has had difficulties. There was danger in the early days that the company would go under. At one point Amazon tried to build an auction site that would compete with eBay. That effort was a flop. Jeff Bezos was a difficult and demanding boss with a nasty temper. He had to hire a leadership coach to get himself under control. In recent days a few employees have staged walkouts because of concerns that the company is not protecting them from the coronavirus. Nevertheless Amazon has become a kingdom that is a dominant force around the world.

The Bible says that we followers of Jesus are part of a kingdom that also is a dominant force around the world. This kingdom likewise had small beginnings. Along the way there have been difficulties and seeming failures. Leaders of this kingdom and followers have often fallen short of the standards which God has promoted. Yet this kingdom continues to grow.

Today we are going to look at an early stage of this kingdom, which began in smallness and has significant challenges. Yet it perseveres and accomplishes God's purposes. We shall look at this story to see what God might have us to learn from this stage of His kingdom, which has a special focus on its early king, David.

I.

We will begin with v. 1 of 2 Samuel #2, which I have labeled DAVID AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING GOD IN HIS KINGDOM. The verse reads in the English Standard translation which I am using, **"Then it came about afterwards that David inquired of the Lord, saying, 'Shall I go up to one of the cities of Judah?' And the Lord said to him, 'Go up.' So David said, 'Where shall I go up?' And He said, 'To Hebron.'"**

We saw last week from #1 that David got news of Israel's defeat in a major battle with the Philistines in the north central part of the country. Saul and his three sons, including David's best friend Jonathan, were killed. David is at Ziklag, which was a town in the border area between the tribe of Judah and Philistia. Six hundred men plus women and children were part of the clan that had gathered around David during his time of being a fugitive from King Saul's efforts to destroy him.

Now David gets direction from the Lord about how to proceed. The text does not specifically say how he received this divine guidance, but we have seen earlier that the priest Abiathar had come over to his clan with the sacred dice, the Urim and Thummim. By asking yes and no questions David had been able to get answers from Abiathar and the Urim and Thummim about God's directions for him. So now David and his clan are directed to proceed to Hebron.

Hebron at this time was the most significant town in the territory allotted to the tribe of Judah. It was, and is, in the south central part of Israel. It has the highest elevation of any Hebrew city in the area, sitting in the Judean highlands at an elevation of over 3000 feet. It is about 19 miles to the southwest of Jerusalem. Abraham and his first descendants hung out here almost a thousand years earlier. Abraham,

Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah are all buried there. Still today there is a massive tomb complex which marks their burial site.

Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about v. 1 is that as David is about to finally step into his leadership role as king of Israel, he seeks direction from the Lord. This had not always been the case. Back in #27 v. 1 of 1 Samuel we were told, **“Then David said in his heart, ‘Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines.’”** David was looking within to figure out what he should do. Under the pressure of the pursuit from Saul he decided to do what his heart, or his gut, told him that he should do. The contrast in his decision making between #27 v. 1 and our text here has great relevance to us today.

Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, had a commencement speech at Stanford University in 2005 which has been often quoted. Having recently been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he told the graduates and their families at the end of his message, **“And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”** Such is the prevailing wisdom in our modern American culture.

Sociologist Robert Bellah describes this way of thinking in his book *Habits of the Heart*. He writes that **“each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality [or identity] is to be realized.”** He says that our culture believes in **“a socially unsituated self from which all [moral and meaning] judgments are supposed to flow.”** (pp. 333-34, 55) We are supposed to follow our heart.

As followers of the God of the Bible, we should recognize a problem with this thinking. The prophet Jeremiah declared in #10 v. 23 of his work, **“I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.”** We are not supposed to look inward, but upward. Jeremiah also said in #17 v. 9, **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”** The heart here, of course, is used as a figure of speech for our innermost being. It is the center of our emotions and will.

The problem is that our heart is full of competing desires and emotions and feelings. Not all of them are healthy. The proper direction in which the follower of God should look is upward. It is toward God. Thus it is that the Psalmist David declared in Psalm 37 vv. 3 & 4, **“Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”**

Now if you are thinking deeply and critically, which is a good thing, you might wonder: If the heart is deceitful and sick, how can it be a good thing that the Lord gives us the desires of our heart? I would propose this solution: We humans have been created in the image of God. By virtue of our original creation we have been created with a legitimate need for security and significance. Because of the Fall, because of the sin nature which all of us have inherited, our legitimate needs have been corrupted and distorted. Now we have this selfish desire to get things for me. We want control and power and money and popularity so that we will feel significant and so that that we will have security. But the only real source of satisfaction for our legitimate needs for security and significance comes from a personal relationship with the God who made us and the Redeemer who saved us from our sin. When our trust is in Him, then the deepest desires of our hearts are truly met.

Many in our congregation are nearing retirement or are already in retirement. The direction of our modern culture would be to follow our hearts. Look within to see what you really want to do. Perhaps it is to travel, or to play golf, or to go fishing, or to pursue some other hobby, or to spend time with the grandchildren. None of these things is necessarily bad in itself. But the direction from God would be to look above. Think about what God would have us to do. We may not get an answer from sacred dice. But if we are spending time reading the Bible and talking to God and looking at our situations in life and our opportunities with heavenly values in mind, we are more likely to get divine direction.

David was God's choice to have a key role in His kingdom program. But under the pressure of life situations even he could lose focus. The same thing can happen to us.

II.

Consider then vv. 2-7 of our text as we look at DAVID AND STRATEGIC EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH GOD'S KINGDOM. We read in v. 2, **"So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel."** David moves his family to Hebron. The specific mention of his two wives is perhaps a hint at a looming problem. The pattern established for marriage in Genesis is one man and one woman. In Deuteronomy #17 Moses specifically warned future generations that their kings were not to multiply wives for themselves. But David and most of the Israelite kings would cave in to the culture which would tell them that the multiplication of wives by kings would show the world the extent of their power and might. Large families would be evidence of their virility

Verse 3: **"And David brought up his men who were with him, everyone with his household, and they lived in the towns of Hebron."** This amounted to 600 men plus women and children. The towns of

Hebron would include outlying villages. Remember that this was an agrarian culture. Most of these people would be herders and olive growers and grape growers. Recognize that this is also a very humble beginning for the start of the kingdom of God which the Lord seeks to establish under David's human leadership.

In the first part of v. 4 we are told, **"And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah."** Probably leaders of the tribe gathered together for this. I would guess that Abiathar the priest was involved in anointing David with oil before the gathered crowd. Thus there was a public acknowledgement of God's choice of David to be their leader.

In the second part of v. 4 we read, **"When they told David, 'It was the men of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul...'"** At the beginning of Saul's reign, the city of Jabesh-gilead was surrounded by the Ammonites. They threatened to wipe out the city. The newly anointed King Saul gathered the Israelite troops and defeated the Ammonites and rescued the town. The citizens of the town did not forget that contribution to their survival. So when they learned that Saul and his sons had been killed and that their bodies were strung up on the walls of Beth-shan, they retrieved the bodies and properly disposed of them in their town.

Verses 5-7: **"David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead and said to them, 'May you be blessed by the Lord, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord and buried him. Now may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. And I will do good to you because you have done this thing. Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be valiant, for Saul your lord is dead, and the house of Judah has anointed me king over them.'"** Jabesh-gilead was about 80 miles to the north and east of Hebron. It was on the east side of the Jordan River.

David uses a significant Hebrew word for love (*chesed*), translated here as "steadfast love," to describe Jabesh-gilead's behavior toward Saul. It is a term that is often used in regard to God's covenants with Israel. Jabesh-gilead showed this covenant loyalty to Saul. Saul is dead. Now David is offering this same relationship to the people of this town. He is extending this gracious invitation to them to participate in God's kingdom program. There is no indication that they accept his offer.

We might also notice that there is no evidence at this point of Philistine opposition to David and his fledgling rule. Probably the Philistines saw little evidence of a threat at this point from him to their dominance of Israel.

The humble beginnings of David's kingdom rule is often the nature of God's rule in our world today. Most of us are involved in small places in small churches. Right now none of us Jesus followers are even able to meet together. It is a challenge to know how to do church today. Fortunately we have modern technology that enables us to meet together in some fashion. In all of this we need to have confidence that God is in charge and that He is accomplishing His purposes. Just as David did not seem to be successful in extending His kingdom to the people of Jabesh-gilead, sometimes we are not successful in our efforts to extend God's kingdom to people around us. But our responsibility is to keep persevering. God is at work. Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. It always begins small. It is slow to grow, but eventually it becomes something worth noticing.

III.

In vv. 8-11 we come to Roman numeral III in my outline, ABNER AND HUMAN THREATS TO GOD'S KINGDOM. According to vv. 8-11, **"But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim, and he made him king over Gilead and the Ashurites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel. Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months."** Notice that for the first time we see the distinction made between Judah and the other tribes in the north, which are here labeled "Israel." During the later Divided Kingdom period, this is the distinction that will prevail. The northern kingdom is known as Israel, and the southern kingdom is known as Judah, which has already absorbed the tribe of Simeon, which was originally assigned to occupy territory within the larger tribe of Judah.

We were told in the last chapter of 1 Samuel that Saul and three sons were killed in the battle with the Philistines. Where was Ish-bosheth during the battle? We don't know. Perhaps he was in the battle but survived. Perhaps he was specifically assigned to stay in the capital of Gibeah.

The name of this son is intriguing. "Ish-bosheth" means "man of shame." Who would give their kid that kind of name? In 1 Chronicles #8 v. 33 his name is given as Eshbaal, "man of Baal." Baal was the name of the primary Canaanite God. The suspicion is that the scribes reacted negatively to that name and instead wrote down Ish-bosheth for his name in 2 Samuel. We might still wonder why Saul and his wife would give this name to their son. Saul had been chosen by YHWH to be king of Israel. The other thing to realize is that the Hebrew word "Baal" was also used for "master" or "lord." So perhaps Ish-bosheth's parents intended his original name to mean "man of the Lord," that is YHWH, the God of Israel.

The description of the political situation in these verses gives us a clue about the broader geopolitical situation confronting Israel. Israel had suffered a major military defeat at Jezreel. Yet the northern tribes did not accept David's leadership. It would be seven and a half years before David would become king of the whole nation. For the first five and a half years of that time there was no king in northern Israel. Probably the Philistines had control over this northern part of Israel. The Israelites were not able to appoint a new king. Abner, the military commander under Saul, was the strongest political and military leader among the Israelites. It took him five and a half years before he was able to promote someone to be king. Even then, the place where he was appointed to rule as king was east of the Jordan River, far from the power base of the Philistines. Ish-bosheth's rule then extended only over part of the territory that had been originally assigned by God to the people of Israel.

David was not inclined to force his leadership over this northern area. Abner was the strongest leader there, and he was not inclined to give up control to David. Then also the Philistines were dominant in this area, and David did not yet have enough power to take on the Philistines. There was one added issue that arose when Ish-bosheth became king. David had promised King Saul that he would look after his descendants. In #24 v. 21 of 1 Samuel Saul said to David, **"Swear to me therefore by the Lord that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house."** In the next verse David made that promise. So David was bound by his own promise not to cut off Ish-bosheth.

Both Ish-bosheth and Abner knew that they were opposing God's revealed will by not promoting David to be king over the whole country. We see in #3, which we will look at next week, that Abner declares in v. 18, **"...for the Lord has promised David, saying, 'By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.'"** So Abner and Ish-bosheth both know that they are opposing God's revealed kingdom plans.

The primary challenge which comes to God's kingdom purposes comes from Abner. He is the real human power behind Ish-bosheth. We need to review his Biblical history to understand the nature of his threat. He is first mentioned in 1 Samuel #14 v. 50: **"And the name of Saul's wife was Ahinoam the daughter of Ahimaaz. And the name of the commander of his army was Abner the son of Ner, Saul's uncle."** So Abner is Saul's nephew.

In #17 Abner was with Saul when David killed Goliath. He was watching the action from a safe distance with King Saul. He sees the courage and skill and strength that the younger David has and that apparently he does not have. In #18 v. 13 Saul makes David a commander of a thousand men. David

continues to have success. Abner hears the song that is sung about Saul slaying his thousands and David his ten thousands, and no mention is made of Abner at all.

In #20 v. 25 we are told that Saul and Jonathan and Abner and David ate together on a regular basis. Abner witnesses Saul's growing jealousy toward David. He is probably involved in carrying out orders from the king in the attempts to kill David. He is probably the chief military leader under Saul who leads the 3000 man army tasked to track down David.

In #24 David has a chance to kill Saul when the king comes into the cave to relieve himself. Afterward David confronts Saul and announces that he had the chance to kill him but would not take it. In v. 9 he says to Saul, **"Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Behold, David seeks your harm'?"** Who might be feeding Saul that line? Might it include Abner?

In #26 David and Abishai sneak into the camp of the Israelite army. They take the spear and the water bottle of King Saul. Abner is right next to the king. When they are a safe distance away, David yells down to the king and the surrounding army. In vv. 14-16 we read, **"And David called to the army, and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, 'Will you not answer, Abner?' Then Abner answered, 'Who are you who calls to the king?' And David said to Abner, 'Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord. This thing that you have done is not good. As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the Lord's anointed. And now see where the king's spear is and the jar of water that was at his head.'"** This had to be a total embarrassment to Abner.

Then in vv. 18 & 19 of #26 David addresses Saul: **"And he said, 'Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the Lord who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before the Lord, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of the Lord, saying, "Go, serve other gods.'"** Is it possible, and even likely, that Abner has encouraged Saul in his enmity toward David. If David becomes king, Abner is likely to lose his position. Something even worse could happen to him.

Abner had to be present in the battle against the Philistines in #31. He obviously survived it. Why wasn't he in the immediate vicinity of Saul when he and his sons were killed? Where was he? We don't know. But when you put all of this together, you can see how Abner has become a threat to God's kingdom

purposes. He is not likely to want David to become king of the whole country. He is a part of God's Chosen People, but he is opposing God's kingdom program.

Occasionally in our family experience and in our church experience we may encounter people who appear to be believers, but who just blatantly oppose God's kingdom purposes. They may act nasty and downright evil. Psychiatrist Scott Peck in his book *People of the Lie* cites the observation of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, **"Since the primary motive of the evil is disguise, one of the places evil people are most likely to be found is within the church. What better way to conceal one's evil from oneself, as well as from others, than to be a deacon or some other highly visible form of Christian within our culture. ...evil people tend to gravitate toward piety for the disguise and concealment it can offer them."** (p. 76-77) We should not be shocked if, in our lifetime experience in churches, we occasionally encounter people who adamantly oppose God's kingdom purposes revealed in His Word.

IV.

In the remainder of the chapter, vv. 12-32, we encounter JOAB AND ABNER AND CONFLICTS IN GOD'S KINGDOM. According to vv. 12 & 13, **"Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon. And Joab the son of Zeruiah and the servants of David went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon. And they sat down, the one on the one side of the pool, and the other on the other side of the pool."**

The reason for this confrontation is unstated. The exact location of Mahanaim is uncertain. It was somewhere to the east of the Jordan River. Gibeon was six miles to the northwest of Jerusalem in territory assigned to the tribe of Benjamin. The Book of Joshua called Gibeon "a great city." There was a large well there that can still be visited today. It is 36 feet in diameter and about 36 feet deep. Joab was Abner's counterpart in the army of David. Joab was David's nephew.

Verses 14-16: **"And Abner said to Joab, 'Let the young men arise and compete before us.' And Joab said, 'Let them arise.' Then they arose and passed over by number, twelve for Benjamin and Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. And each caught his opponent by the head and thrust his sword in his opponent's side, so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called Helkath-hazzurim, which is at Gibeon."**

Abner takes the initiative here. Perhaps the whole encounter was his idea. This becomes a representative battle, in a way similar to David's encounter with Goliath. The choice of twelve men for

each side is perhaps intended to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, whose leadership is in question. In the hand-to-hand combat which ensues all 24 men die. This begins to look like a rumble between two gangs more than a conflict between two military forces. It involves the Judes and the Benjies, and they all have switch blades, or knives of some sort.

Look at vv. 17 & 18: **“And the battle was very fierce that day. And Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David. And the three sons of Zeruiah were there, Joab, Abishai, and Asahel. Now Asahel was as swift of foot as a wild gazelle.”** The three key players on David’s team, or in David’s gang, are brothers and nephews of David.

Verses 19-22: **“And Asahel pursued Abner, and as he went, he turned neither to the right hand nor to the left from following Abner. Then Abner looked behind him and said, ‘Is it you, Asahel?’ And he answered, ‘It is I.’ Abner said to him, ‘Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and seize one of the young men and take his spoil.’ But Asahel would not turn aside from following him. And Abner said again to Asahel, ‘Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab?’”**

Again this has the makings of gang warfare. Abner is concerned that killing Asahel will lead to a long blood feud with the family of Joab. In the Ancient Near East the brother of a murder victim had the responsibility to kill the murderer of a brother. This is not exactly a murder here. This involves warfare and an act of self-defense. But Joab may not see it that way, especially if Abner was the initiator of this incident.

Verse 23: **“But he refused to turn aside. Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the butt of his spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he fell there and died where he was. And all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died, stood still.”** Asahel’s fellow soldiers are taken aback by the death of one of their leaders.

Look at vv. 24-26: **“But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner. And as the sun was going down they came to the hill of Ammah, which lies before Giah on the way to the wilderness of Gibeon. And the people of Benjamin gathered themselves together behind Abner and became one group and took their stand on the top of a hill. Then Abner called to Joab, ‘Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?’”**

Abner's forces are fleeing east toward home. Abner makes an effort to call off the conflict. It is ironic in that there is some evidence that he initiated it. But he realizes that this could be a nasty and a longer conflict.

Verse 27: **"And Joab said, 'As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely the men would not have given up the pursuit of their brothers until the morning.'"** The meaning of these words is unclear. There are two possible interpretations. It could mean that Joab is saying that none of this would have happened if you had not initiated this encounter in the first place. The other possibility is reflected in the NIV translation of the verse. It says that **"if you had not spoken, the men would have continued pursuit of their brothers until morning."** The commentators are divided. In any event, Joab called off his men.

Verses 28-29: **"So Joab blew the trumpet, and all the men stopped and pursued Israel no more, nor did they fight anymore. And Abner and his men went all that night through the Arabah. They crossed the Jordan, and marching the whole morning, they came to Mahanaim."** Abner's men march all night and half of the next day before they get home.

Verses 30 & 31: **"Joab returned from the pursuit of Abner. And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing from David's servants nineteen men besides Asahel. But the servants of David had struck down of Benjamin 360 of Abner's men."** Perhaps this is evidence of God's blessing on the forces of David. The death rate for Abner's forces was 18 times greater than that of Joab's.

Finally, v. 32: **"And they took up Asahel and buried him in the tomb of his father, which was at Bethlehem. And Joab and his men marched all night, and the day broke upon them at Hebron."** It was about 25 miles back to Hebron. Bethlehem was along the route back home. It was the hometown of David's whole clan.

In God's sovereign plan He introduced the idea of a human king to lead His kingdom with Saul. Saul flamed out. David, the man after God's own heart, had to endure a long ordeal before he could be enthroned. Even then his initial introduction to the kingship began on a small scale. It would be seven and a half more years before he would be leader of the whole country. Along the way there was going to be more conflict. There were people who were opposed to God's kingdom purposes.

Centuries later Jesus would appear upon the scene. He would be rejected by His own people. He would be killed. But out of that seeming tragedy the church would arise. It was small at first. But it would grow and eventually fill the earth. Along the way there is conflict.

In our small involvement with God's kingdom program, it is hard to always see what God is doing. Sometimes we seem to take backward steps before we can move forward. At times it is hard to see fruit for our labors. Sometimes, as in our story, there is conflict with people who are supposed to be part of our own clan and to have our same goals in mind.

But our responsibility is always to follow the heavenly King, to do what is right. Someday when we get to heaven, we will see how our role fit together with God's larger kingdom purposes. Maybe we will discover that the coronavirus pandemic forced us to develop a relationship with our neighbor. Perhaps we learn that the pandemic was used of God to lead to a deeper relationship with our own family. Perhaps we will discover that it was an opportunity to reach new people with modern technology. But know for sure that we are part of a global and heavenly program that will one day see our King rule upon the earth.